

The Incubus in Film, Experience, and Folklore

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McClenon, James, and Emily D. Edwards. "The Incubus in Film, Experience, and Folklore." *Southern Folklore* 52.1 (1996): 3-18.

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Abstract:

The incubus motif, prevalent in American horror movies, displays a victim, usually female, subjected to sexual attack by an unnatural entity during sleep or a sleep-like state.¹ This study tests a hypothesis derived from the theory that media images govern the incidence and content of such anomalous accounts. It compares cinematic incubus motifs with memorates—stories told as personal experiences and believed by the tellers to be true.

Since many of our findings fail to support the media images/cultural source hypothesis, we present an alternate model. Many incubus experiences coincide with patterns related to sleep paralysis. We suggest that sleep paralysis coupled with sexual arousal spawns memorates which provide a basis for incubus folklore.

Article:

The Cultural Source Theory

David Hufford (1982a, 1982b, 1983) argues that modern societies support a "culture of disbelief" which assumes that occult experiences are cultural products. This paradigm is based on an implicit set of assumptions regarding the power of culture to shape experience. Occult reports are thought to evolve from social or individual stress, anxiety, or deprivation. The proliferation and longevity of supernatural doctrines are assumed to reflect social disorders and flaws in the scientific education system (Schumaker 1990; Zusne and Jones 1982; Singer and Benassi 1981).

Prominent theorists support these suppositions. Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud held agnostic positions, promoting skepticism regarding supernatural beliefs. Durkheim theorized that religion originated when primitive people mistook group sensations for the effects of religious forces. Marx referred to religion as the opium of the masses, a product of class struggle. Freud attributed the religious impulse to infantile needs. Even if such theorizing seems outdated, modern sociologists argue that religious experiences reflect sociocultural, biographical, and situational contexts. They tend to assume that all anomalous perceptions have social-psychological explanations and suggest that "interactional paths," which involve exposure to particular religious metaphors, predispose a person toward having specific anomalous experiences (Straus 1981:61).

A variety of research supports this orientation. Visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary tend to occur during times of religious tension (Rogo 1982), and people report fewer Marian visions during times when such accounts are rejected (Christian 1981). Apparitional folklore reflects the culture of its origin: ghosts seen by Catholics are more likely to claim they have visited purgatory than those witnessed by Protestants (Finucane 1984). Although it is difficult to determine the degree to which the incidence of occult accounts reflects actual experience, wide variations in reporting among cultural groups suggest that social factors influence the frequency and form of anomalous perceptions (Haraldsson 1985; McClenon 1994).

The cultural source theory allows clearly stated hypotheses. In schematic form, the theory specifies that: culture + belief + psychological factors = anomalous experience. Thus we asserted that because the media shape and reflect modern culture and belief, the form and incidence of modern anomalous experiences should vary in

accordance with the emphasis placed on particular motifs in the media. The incidence of Elvis Presley sightings, for example, should vary with the mention of him in the news. This hypothesis can be applied to the incubus motif in popular media: the incidence and content of personal incubus experiences should reflect, to a general degree, the incidence and content of media representations. Those with higher exposure to cinematic incubus motifs should have greater probability of perceiving incubus events. We tested this hypothesis by comparing incubus themes in American horror movies with first-hand incubus reports.

The Incubus in Horror Movies

Tabloid newspapers, music videos, comic books, television, and horror movies play important roles in shaping and transmitting images of the occult. Incubi appear as wicked, lustful, supernatural agents which inflict physical and spiritual harm on their victims. The motif, which combines the highly marketable elements of fear, sex, and violence, is particularly evident in horror movies.

Horror movies tend to follow a common format. They depict a monstrous predator, are constructed around the "hunt" or "chase," contain elements of the fantastic, and either portray or suggest violence and violent death (Edwards 1991:24). The protagonist regards the creature as inconceivable, unclean, or disgusting (Carroll 1990:22). As in myths and folktales, horror movies frequently present a strange dislocation of familiar and naturalistic connections.

The idea of being sexually attacked, seduced, or possessed while asleep has been prevalent in horror movies since the silent era and such films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). The theme also appears in early science fiction films like *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958). With technological advance, machines took on incubus characteristics: in *Demon Seed* (1977) a demonic computer rapes and impregnates the wife of a research scientist. But it is gothic horror movies that provide the clearest examples of the incubus motif. In one such classic, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), the protagonist Rosemary is raped and impregnated by the devil while in a drugged sleep. In *Cat People* (1942 and remade in 1982) a young engineer marries a strange, shy woman who becomes a monstrous panther when sexually aroused. His wife's curse justifies the young husband's extramarital interests. The theme is likewise implemented in werewolf films like *Werewolf in a Girl's Dormitory* (1963).

Incubus themes are evident in vampire movies from *Nosferatu* (1922) and its remake *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) to the various film versions of *Dracula* (1931, 1973, 1979, 1992). It is not surprising to find sleep and sleeping victims a common theme in the numerous vampire spin-offs such as *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), *The Devil Bat* (1940), *The Return of the Vampire* (1943), *Brides of Dracula* (1960), *Dracula, Prince of Darkness* (1966), *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (1968), *Dance of the Vampires* (1967), *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Old Dracula* (1974), *Vampire Circus* (1972), *Vampire Lovers* (1971), and *Vampire Hookers* (1967). The concept of the vampire as incubus is particularly exploited in *Dance of the Vampires* (1967), which juxtaposes shots of a young woman in bed with scenes of the same woman pursued by a monster.

Because horror movies fulfill special functions in modern society, cultural source theorists would hypothesize that they have distinctive impacts on anomalous experience. Horror movies appeal most to adolescent males, furnishing a rite of passage for young men in a society where no instituted rituals exist to promote mastery of fright (Zillman and Bryant 1986). The laughably bad productions are particularly suited for fulfilling this function: bad production values allow occult themes to be more easily ridiculed.

Sexuality in horror movies is uniquely tailored to the psyches of troubled adolescents (Evans 1975; Tellote 1987). Horror movies allow adolescents to safely explore the taboos of sex and death (Hogan 1986) as they struggle with private and dynamic desires which seem stronger than the social barriers erected to control them. Adolescents identify with promiscuity as well as grisly and excessive punishment for it (Wood 1987:81). The eroticism associated with the incubus, like the sexual impulses experienced by adolescents, seems beyond human control. For female audiences, some media depictions present a demon lover who is forceful, sexy, and in some instances, who offers eternal youth and power.

On a subconscious level, horror movies may provide functional alternatives for religious faith. Horror movies examine ideas and generate sensations scorned in an era of disbelief (Rosenbaum 1979). Emily Edwards's data from a random sample of the general population of Knoxville, Tennessee, revealed that people who frequently attend horror movies report greater belief in ESP, extraterrestrial aliens, and ghosts (1984:83). A significant negative correlation existed between religious orthodoxy and interest in watching horror movies ($r = -.26, p < .001$).

According to the cultural source theory, then, exposure to occult motifs contributes to visionary perceptions. Cinematic incubus motifs should have special impact on adolescents receiving the most exposure. Those with subconscious fears regarding the opposite sex might be particularly susceptible since many incubus portrayals reflect the "culture of rape" within American society.² The content and frequency of such experiences should correspond with the content and frequency of incubus images within popular culture.

The Incubus Motif During the 1980s: A Content Analysis

More than 12% of the big rental films distributed in the United States from 1980 to 1989 as listed in *Variety* belong to the horror genre. However, many works of horror are not major studio productions and are not distributed through movie theaters but are released directly to the video market. Edwards conducted a content analysis of horror films reviewed in the *Film Review Annual* and the *Motion Picture Guide* from 1980 to 1989 to determine the prevalence of the incubus motif. The *Film Review Annual* contains reviews from *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Cineaste*, *Film Quarterly*, *Films in Review*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, *The New Leader*, *New York Magazine*, *New York Post*, *Newsday*, *Newsweek*, *Saturday Review*, *Sight and Sound*, *Time*, *The Village Voice*, and *Women's Wear Daily*. These two film guides contain reviews for both major theatrical releases and lower-budget films.

Although individual movies were the unit of analysis, scenes were the predominant unit of observation. A scene was classified as containing incubus motifs if it depicted sexual assault or seduction of a human by a supernatural entity; the person could be either awake or asleep. A scene was also classified as incubus if the entity possessed the human during sleep. If a film contained one incubus scene, the film was classified as having "existing" incubus themes. A film was classified as having "moderate" incubus themes if it contained two or three incubus scenes. Films were deemed to be "predominantly" incubus if they contained more than three incubus scenes. The analysis did not separate the motif by gender into incubi and succubi.

Not all of the 440 horror films distributed in the United States from January 1980 to January 1989 were available for screening. Where reviews indicated the possibility of an incubus motif, every attempt was made to screen the film. Thirty-nine percent of the films were screened (172 of the 440). This causes the count of movies with incubus themes to be a conservative estimate since some unscreened films possibly contain incubus motifs.

The analysis indicates that incubus motifs were prevalent in horror films during the 1980s. Fifty seven of the screened films contained incubus motifs, suggesting that about 33% of the approximately 440 horror films distributed in the United States in the 1980s contained incubus/succubus scenes. The theme "existed" in 14%, was "moderate" in 8%, and was "dominant" in 12% of the analysis population. Toward the end of the 1980s, incubus themes became more predominant and openly erotic.

Qualitative Analysis of the Cinema Incubus Motif

In the 1980s, incubi and succubi were manifested as ghosts, spirits, vampires, monsters, demons, resurrected corpses, and alien creatures. Examples include *The Visitor* (1980), *Ghost Story* (1981), *Deadly Blessing* (1981), *Cat People* (1982), *The Hunger* (1983), *Liquid Sky* (1983), *Fright Night* (1985), *Life Force* (1985), *The Tomb* (1986), *Near Dark* (1987), *The Lost Boys* (1987), *My Demon Lover* (1987), *Hellbound: Hellraiser* (1988), *To Die For* (1989), and *Dance of the Damned* (1989). Sleep possession was also a popular theme in horror movies during the 1980s, featured in such movies as the popular *Nightmare on Elm Street* series,³ *The Boogey Man* (1981), *Dreamscape* (1984), *The Blue Man* (1986), *Angel Heart* (1987), *Death Moon* (1985), *Dreamanic*

(1987), *Slumber Party Massacre* (1987), *Retribution* (1988), and *Bad Dreams* (1988).

Two films produced early in the 1980s have the incubus concept as primary themes: *The Incubus*. (Artist Releasing Corporation 1982) and *The Entity* (Twentieth Century Fox 1981). *The Entity* was based on the real life experiences of a young widow and mother and on the investigation of her case by Kerry Gaynor, a parapsychologist in the Los Angeles area. This film differs from others in the genre; although the movie contains much violence, no one is killed. Barbara Hershey plays the young mother, frequently tormented and raped by an unseen spirit assailant. This movie constitutes a special case and will be reviewed more fully within the discussion of first-hand accounts.

More typical is *The Incubus*, which has a plot leaving a bloody trail of victims. In the story, a demon summoned through a trance-induced nightmare commits a series of rape/murders. The idea of a succession of victims is similar to the direct-to-video release *Breeders* (1986), in which nubile victims are raped, scarred with acid, and smeared with a mysterious black substance. They later leave the hospital in a trance, returning to the alien creatures that raped them. In parallel fashion, *Humanoids from the Deep* (1980) portrays underwater monsters emerging to rape a series of bikini-clad sunbathers dozing on the beaches of a small oceanside community .

Like incubi in Judeo-Christian tradition, most horror movie creatures wish to mate with women. Their strategies range from violent rape to Svengali-like seduction. Some film portrayals of incubi are sympathetic, featuring something equivalent to cross-species romance. For example, *My Demon Lover* (1987) tells the story of Kaz, a street derelict who turns into a demonic beast whenever he is sexually aroused. He falls in love with a good-hearted woman, Denny, who faints when she witnesses the demonic transformation. She wakes believing it was "all a dream." Once Denny is satisfied that the transformation is real, she is able to help Kaz overcome his curse with a noble deed. *To Die For* (1989), *The Lost Boys* (1987), *The Hunger* (1983), and *Dance of the Damned* (1987) are also examples of films which portray supernatural romance.

Not all licentious spirits are male. For example, *Hellbound: Hellraiser II* (1988) depicts a skinless female demon seducing the perverse Dr. Channard. *Ghost Story* (1981) portrays the vengeful and seductive spirit of a wronged woman.

Several films portray the results of incubus unions. Movies such as *The Offspring* (1987), *The Godsend* (1980), *The Beast Within* (1982), *Breeders* (1986), and *Witchcraft* (1989) are film portrayals of monstrous progeny. One such film, *Beyond the Door*, originally released in 1974 and re-released to the video market in 1982, borrows heavily from *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). It depicts a distraught wife during her mysterious and rapidly advancing pregnancy. Early in the movie invisible hands pull the covers from the sleeping woman to a soundtrack of monstrous crooning, a clue to the audience that this pregnancy is far from normal.

The Incubus in First-Hand Experience

Tabloid newspapers and television talk shows consider personal incubus accounts newsworthy, giving these reports particular impact on mass culture. For example, in 1993 television talk show host Sally Jessy Raphael interviewed a mother and daughters who claimed to have been sexually molested by ghosts. Tabloid newspapers sporadically feature equivalent first-hand incubus accounts: an issue of *Sun* described a widow who dreamed of sex with her deceased husband and, as a result, conceived a child (1992:23). Hans Holzer authored a book providing many cases, among them:

. . . I suddenly found myself in a strange state of trance. I couldn't wake up, yet I observed everything going on around me. I couldn't move, no matter how much I tried. Then, suddenly, I felt something heavy on top of me . . . someone invisible was pressing on me. . . . It was definitely a human body, and there was no mistaking its intention. In a second I realized that a ghostly male was having intercourse with me . . . and even more amazing, I was actively participating. It felt . . . well, just like having sex with a man, only I couldn't see anything. But I sure felt it. (1992:202)

According to the cultural source hypothesis, such memorates, originating with cultural images, occur more frequently among those most exposed to incubus motifs.

The incidence of incubus experiences was quantified through surveys of randomly sampled populations, gathering folklore memorates, and field investigations of haunting cases. James McClenon (1988, 1990, 1994) polled random samples of American, Japanese, and Chinese college students regarding anomalous experiences. Respondents were asked "If you have had a very unusual experience, would you describe it briefly?" Approximately 8% of those responding furnished narratives, providing about 150 accounts. None of these reports contained incubus themes.

McClenon collected more than a thousand anomalous experience accounts in North Carolina between 1988 and 1993. This study was not designed to gather any particular form of experience but to compile occult narratives. Four accounts had incubus themes, one of which was a joke. McClenon also interviewed respondents reporting experiences in 25 haunting cases and two of these respondents provided incubus accounts. The joke illustrates cultural reaction to the incubus motif:

The TV talk show host asked those in his audience who had seen a ghost to stand. About twenty people stood up. Then he asked, 'Would those of you who have had sex with a ghost remain standing?' All but one man sat down. 'Sir?' the host asked, incredulously. 'Did you actually have sex with a ghost?' 'Ghost?' the man asked in surprise. 'Thought you said goal!' (McClenon 1987-93)

The story gains its humor partly from the shame associated with unnatural sex. Greater stigma surrounds intercourse with an animal than sex with a spirit, since bestial sex is thought to be more possible and hence more probable. Unlike Renaissance Inquisitioners, the majority of modern people assume that ghosts are culturally constructed while goats are not. Those reporting apparitional events are thought to be mentally unbalanced rather than morally negligent.

In response to this attitude, people perceiving extremely anomalous events often conceal their experiences. Five narratives from the North Carolina collection (1987-93) allow comparison with cinematic incubus motifs:

1. A woman claimed that the Devil "bound her down" and had intercourse with her. She awoke from sleep and was unable to resist. She had no explanation for why this event occurred. She did not actually see the Devil but inferred his existence from her sensations.

2. One woman described apparition experiences of her deceased logger husband:

One night I was in bed [with my infant daughter, S.] and he came in the room and he said, 'What is S. doing in the bed?' . . . I said, 'You don't belong here. Go back to where you came from!'

She then perceived a clear odor of pine, associated with his occupation. Later she awoke to the experience of having sexual intercourse with him.

3. A woman developed memories that she had been abducted by extraterrestrial aliens. She participated in an organization that supported people who had such memories and took part in hypnosis sessions designed to bring forth her memories. Later she remembered that she had had sex with an alien and that she had given birth to an alien child. She termed her sexual relationship with the alien as not completely consensual but "not rape" since there was a degree of consent.

4. Two female housemates felt threatened by a spiritual force which sporadically attempted to climb into bed with them, creating a crushing sensation of paralysis. On two occasions, one woman perceived the force as a shadow which hovered in the corner of the room before attacking her later in the evening:

Then it was on me. I heard a terrible screaming and I couldn't move. I can't say how long this lasted. B. [her housemate] said that it was my voice screaming.

B. was skeptical until she perceived the force as climbing on her own body. The women denied having strong religious beliefs or interest in occult topics.

5. A nine-member family (mother, father, mother's sister, two adult sons, and two adult divorced daughters each having one son) reported hearing anomalous sounds (knocking, banging, drununing, whistling, singing, talking), seeing apparitions, unexplained movement of objects, unexplained lights, feeling anomalous sensations, and having unusual nightmares. On many occasions, anomalous events were experienced simultaneously by more than one person. Experiences sometimes coincided with night paralysis episodes. For example, one daughter awoke, felt paralyzed, and perceived an anomalous light on the wall. She later experienced a series of nightmares involving sex with priests, diseased individuals, and a huge disembodied penis. The dreams were regarded as a product of the force that was haunting the house. She claimed the huge penis provided "the most powerful orgasms in my life" and that "the dreams weren't normal. I couldn't move." Other family members awoke from sleep, felt paralyzed, and perceived apparitions. Only one family member, the father, regarded himself as extremely religious. None were previously interested in occult themes (also McClenon 1981, 1994, 1981-93).

Evaluation of the Cultural Source Hypothesis

Although the incubus motif is prevalent in modern culture, the narrative collection contains few incubi perceptions. The collection included a large number of precognitive dreams, apparitions, contacts with the dead, waking extrasensory perceptions, sleep paralysis, and out-of-body experiences, yet incubi accounts were rare. None of the reports gained through random samples and less than 0.5% of the 1000 collected anomalous narratives refer to incubus episodes. This finding does not coincide with cultural source predictions.

The cultural source theory specifies that experiencers have special deprivations (Straus 1981), yet all respondents reporting incubus episodes were middle-class, employed, and seemingly in good physical health. Rather than being adolescents, as might be predicted, all were above the age of 30. None reported any history of psychological disorder. Three of the five respondents (cases 2, 4, and 5) reported no previous interest in occult or religious topics.

The extraterrestrial alien account (case 3) coincides most closely with the cultural source model. Although psychological factors have not been clearly delineated, hypnotic techniques may have played a role in the formation of abduction memories. It would seem that the respondent followed an "interactional path" which predisposed her to devise incubus memorates. Richard Noll (1992) provides accounts of perceptions of vampires, werewolves, and unnatural monsters which coincide with this example case in that some people perceive extremely anomalous phenomena coinciding with their psychological needs. Such cases do support the cultural source theory.

Although all respondents interpreted their perceptions within the context of their culture, four of the five respondents provided no information suggesting an "interactional path" which "can be said to predispose a subject toward having specifically religious experiences," the assumption made by cultural source theorists (Straus 1981:61). The cultural source orientation, although not refuted by the data, provides little predictive capacity.

The Experiential Source Theory

Hufford provides an alternate model for discussing some forms of anomalous reports (1982a). He hypothesizes that certain anomalous experiences contain universal features which have the capacity to shape belief rather than be shaped by it. This experiential source pattern can be presented schematically as: experience + cultural interpretation = narrative account + belief. Within this orientation, belief does not always produce experience, as in the cultural source model. In some cases, experience produces belief.

Hufford's theory was developed through analysis of sleep paralysis cases. (Sleep paralysis is the experience of waking from sleep and feeling unable to move.) Hufford gathered sleep paralysis cases in the United States and Newfoundland, finding that these episodes are widespread and have cross-culturally consistent features. Approximately 15% of the populations he surveyed reported paralysis episodes (1982a). Sleep paralysis often includes secondary perceptions: a crushing sensation on the chest, hearing unexplained footsteps, seeing apparitional images, and perceiving the presence of spiritual forces. Hufford hypothesizes that these secondary features contribute to belief in spirits and demons.

McClenon (1994) and Charles Emmons (1982) gathered sleep paralysis accounts in Asia and America which support Hufford's hypothesis. Many cultures have special terms for night paralysis events. For example, in Cantonese, *bei quai chaak* can be translated as "being pressed by a ghost." The experience sometimes begins with *bei quai jui*, "being chased by a ghost" in one's dream (Emmons 1982). Although McClenon (1994) found varying percentages reporting night paralysis events within student populations (University of Maryland: 37%; University of North Carolina, Greensboro: 32%; Elizabeth City State University, North Carolina: 50%; three Chinese colleges in Xi'an: 58%; Tsukuba University, Japan: 50%), analysis of example narratives reveal cross-culturally consistent features:

The most unusual experience I have had was waking up one night and being terrified and unable to move. I felt there was someone in the room with me. It seemed to last a long time. (American student)

I dreamed of an old friend who had died several years ago . . . I was woken up. I felt I couldn't move, though my mind was awake. I tried to take up my hand but it was futile. (Chinese student)

I suddenly became aware of an orange-colored light covering the whole side of the room beyond the foot of my bed ... I tried to get up, but my body wouldn't move. (I think I was barely able to move my fingers.) . . . I tried with all my might to cry out . . . But even then, I could manage no more than a groan. (Japanese student)

Four incubi cases in the present study seemingly combine sleep paralysis and sexuality. Respondents described awaking from sleep (cases 1, 2, 5), being paralyzed (cases 1, 4, 5), feeling a crushing sensation (case 4), seeing paranormal events before the episode (cases 2, 4, 5), perceiving paranormal events during the episode (case 5), experiencing intense fear during the episode (case 4), and experiencing sexual intercourse during the episode (cases 1, 2, 5). Holzer's narrative has an equivalent combination of features: the woman reports a sleep-like state, paralysis, and sexual intercourse with an unseen partner (1992:202).

Sleep paralysis and similar mental states containing sexual features probably contribute to folk motifs regarding incubi. Folk motifs, in turn, affect cinema motifs. Events surrounding production of *The Entity* directly illustrate this process: an investigation conducted by parapsychologist Kerry Gaynor provided the foundation for the fictionalized movie script (1992). A woman claimed to be repeatedly sexually attacked over a period of several years. Although she was never raped or beaten in front of Gaynor, she sometimes called him in hysterics immediately following an attack. Gaynor attempted to verify the paranormal events by inviting professional photographers to stand in various corners of a room. They shot thousands of frames of film of anomalous lights which floated about, simultaneously recording the lights' images from various angles. The woman gradually adjusted to her dilemma and eventually the phenomena dissipated.

The purpose of this discussion is not to argue that the phenomena are paranormal but to portray the types of experience leading to belief. Perceptions of the woman, Gaynor, and the photographers did not originate with horror-movie motifs. Within this example case: experiences + cultural interpretation = narrative account + belief. Not only did the woman come to believe in spirits (the best explanation provided by her society to explain her experience), but Gaynor generated photographic evidence supporting her belief. The movie script was a fictionalized account of this process, ramified to produce entertainment. Unlike the actual case, *The Entity* focused on supernatural rape and portrayed professional parapsychologists constructing elaborate

scientific equipment to capture the demon.

The Incubus Experience in Folklore

The experiential source theory provides the following model: certain people all over the world feel paralyzed and crushed by unseen forces while asleep. When these episodes are associated with sexual arousal, their memorates contribute to incubus folklore.

As would be predicted by this theory, the incubus is a recurring folklore motif. Stith Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature lists F471.1, "Nightmare. Presses person in dream," and F471.2, "Incubus comes in sleep has sex." Examples include the Assyrian lili (Kirk 1970:108), Arab jinn spirits, who sought to kill human lovers by means of excessive demands (Smith 1979:42), and the Semitic Alu-Demon who enters bed-chambers and pounces upon the unwary. In Talmudic lore, Lilith, Adam's original wife, prowls the night, seducing men and killing children (Highwater 1990:22). Classical mythology includes many gods and demons with amorous appetites (Hamilton 1940; Kiessling 1977). European folklore includes various types of trolls and fairies, some of which have incubus characteristics (Briggs 1977).

More frequently, incubus attacks are attributed to demons. Although early medieval theorists argued that nocturnal sexual encounters were in fact dreams, the issue was officially settled in 1484 with the Bull of Pope Innocent VIII in favor of the supernatural hypothesis. In 1489, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger published *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witchcraft), a detailed manual used extensively during witch hunts. In the section headed "Here follows the Way whereby Witches copulate with those Devils known as incubi," the authors made it clear that they were concerned with actual diabolical sexual experiences rather than fantasies.

The celibate clergy of medieval times must have been dismayed by erotic dreams and sleep paralysis episodes. The idea that these experiences were sent by the Devil to frighten, tempt, and contaminate the righteous seemed a convincing explanation. As with the monk Ambrosio who takes up with a female devil in Matthew Gregory Lewis's novel *The Monk* (1796), incubus stories warn of the degradation in store for those who succumb to the amorous appetites of spirits and demons.

Parallel concerns exist in Asian literature. Medieval Chinese and Japanese female spirits, often capable of taking alternate forms as foxes, were thought to visit, seduce, and later kill lonely bachelors, particularly scholars (Ury 1979; Kao 1985).

As would be predicted by the experiential source theory, memorates of incubus episodes giving rise to such folklore are recorded in the anthropological literature. Edward B. Tylor gathered much evidence supporting his version of the experiential source theory. He encountered various incubus reports

among the islanders of the Antilles, where they are the ghosts of the dead, vanishing when clutched; in New Zealand, where ancestral deities 'form attachments with females and pay them repeated visits,' while in the Samoan Islands such intercourse of mischievous inferior gods caused 'many supernatural conceptions'; and in Lapland, where details of this last extreme class have also been placed on record . . . Formal rites are specified in the Hindu Tantra, which enable a man to obtain a companion-nymph by worshipping her and repeating her name by night in a cemetery. Augustine, in an instructive passage, states the popular notions of the visits of incubi, vouched for, he tells us, by testimony of such quantity and quality that it may seem impudent to deny it. (Tylor [1871] 1958:276)

Incubus reports from between 1119-1126 in the Chinese Emperor's harem are also equivalent to modern accounts:

Sometimes the spectre lay down in the bed of a lady of the harem, which was then felt to be warm; and at daybreak it rolled out of the bed and disappeared, nobody knowing where it had gone. And when the ladies of the harem dreamed that they were sleeping with somebody, that somebody was the [spirit]. (De

Readers who feel that the idea of supernatural sex is merely an obscure element in folk belief should remember that the Immaculate Conception is an important concept in Christian theology. Accounts from such varied places and eras suggest that universal features within incubus memorates support recurring folklore motifs. Rather than all reports being the product of cultural images, some types of experience have the capacity to shape folk belief.⁴

Conclusion

Although incubus reports vaguely reflect media images, the evidence calls for a reformulation of the cultural source theory. The scarcity of first-hand incubus accounts, the forms of the collected narratives, the age of respondents claiming incubus experiences, and the lack of occult interests within most informants does not coincide with cultural source predictions. Some incubus memorates seem related to sleep paralysis episodes in which the individual wakes from sleep, feels unable to move, and feels sexually stimulated. These memorates do not appear directly related to cinematic motifs but to recurring episodes probably related to human physiology.

We do not argue that culture has no impact on anomalous perceptions or that informants do not rely on their cultural heritage to explain experiences. Much evidence supports the supposition that culture shapes the interpretation of experience. Rather, we suggest that the standard cultural source model is inadequate for explaining the relationship between cinematic motif and folklore memorate. It is logical to argue that, in some cases, incubus/sleep paralysis perceptions provide a foundation of oral narrative which impact both folk beliefs and media presentations.

NOTES

Previous versions of this paper were presented at the meetings of the Popular Culture Association, Louisville, Kentucky, March 1992 and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Washington, D.C., November 1992. The authors wish to thank David Hufford, as well as those making comments at these meetings, for contributing to the paper's improvement.

1. The word "incubus" is derived from the Latin *incubare*, meaning "to lie down on." The word "succubus" is derived from the Latin *succubare*, "to lie under." The Latin and English words refer respectively to male and female demons believed to have sexual intercourse with humans. For convenience, we include both male and female entities within the broader definition used for our analysis.
2. Cinematic images of the incubus provide many complex symbolic meanings. Although the incubus as a motif was evident in earlier horror movies, the incubus may have had special connotations for teenagers during the 1980s and 1990s. Modern youths face the possibility of contracting AIDS, a real life "vampire" encountered through sexual seduction or exchange of blood. Like the cinema vampire, the AIDS virus lurks concealed before slowly victimizing those it stalks. Film romances between humans and demons may reflect xenophobia in an era of greater interracial and intercultural dating. If producers seek to use motifs with contemporary relevance, these symbolic interpretations may provide some explanation for the increase in the appearance of incubus motifs toward the end of the 1980s. However, symbolic explanations do not clarify why the increase in incubus portraits in media have little impact on the reporting of anomalous experiences.
3. Film critics may observe that the Freddy Kruger character from the horror movie series based on Wes Craven's *Nighonare on Elm Street* (1984) may seem more like a monster whose fundamental goal is not sexual molestation but the murder of teenagers. Kruger attacks and destroys his victims during sleep. He is less like the lustful incubus and more like the homicidal maniac of the psychological horror movie, although he is clearly a supernatural creature. While Kruger is primarily an enterprising killer with a tortured sense of humor, there are moments when incubus themes are invoked. For example, in one scene from the original film, Kruger tells the female protagonist, "I'm your boyfriend now." For these reasons, films from the *Nightmare* series were coded as have "existing" themes. The Kruger character also illustrates how media take old motifs and create new media mythologies. However, the content and frequency of these new media mythologies do not correspond with memorates.

4. An analysis of the relationship between cinematic motifs and folk belief is beyond the scope of this study. Mass markets affect media presentations; the financial success of a film leads to the use of its themes and images in other productions so that old motifs are often shaped into new media mythologies. This has led to the markedly different images regarding intercourse between spirits and humans in cinema as compared to folk literature. Because of exaggerated portrayals catering to market demands and low budget production values, horror movie presentations often support skepticism about paranormal events rather than belief. Overall, cinematic themes seemingly perpetuate and disparage folk beliefs.

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